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Discussion after the Speech of Dr. Stuart Smith

Discussion

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DISCUSSION AFTER THE SPEECH OF DR. STUART SMITH

QUESTION, *Professor King*: You have told us what it is we have to do to get going. Do you do it through volunteerism; do you do it by government regulation; do you do it by exhortation? Is it so obvious it is going to happen anyway?

My other question is, does the employer have any obligation to train workers so that they have mobility?

ANSWER, *Dr. Smith*: I do not think an employer has an obligation to train workers to have mobility. I think it makes good sense, however, for employers to train people, but the argument of mobility is often used as an excuse for not contributing toward the proper training of employees.

I think the levy grant system in France makes a lot of sense. There you have a fund and employers are obliged to contribute to it. If they educate people, they get grants from the fund. If they are not educating people, they just make contributions. I think that is one way that this can be dealt with if we are willing to accept that degree of government intervention.

This, however, is not an era when people are going to take kindly to government, and I do not think that the levy grant system is likely to happen in the near future. But in the long term, I think we should seriously look at it. We value mobility in North America, probably more than they do in Europe, and in a place that values mobility as much as we do, a levy grant system makes a lot of sense. It is not reasonable for every single employer to create training programs, but they all benefit from a better trained labour pool.

As to the first issue, what is going to solve the problem? What is going to get us to that era where we have the learning resources, where teaching is valued at universities? I have two different answers.

In Canada it will only happen if the government demands it. That is because the Canadian system of education is basically a government system. All the universities are essentially publicly funded institutions. In the United States you have an advantage because you do have a significant system of private market-oriented institutions. It is also a disadvantage because it means that, *on average*, Canadians probably get a better education than Americans get; however, at the top you are getting much better experiences than we are getting.

It is a bit like the health care system. Those who can afford it in the United States are getting really superb health care, probably better than they get in Canada. But for the average person, I think you have a better situation living in Canada.

So in Canada I think the government has got to do it. Here I

think, little by little, the market will be effective. This is one of the things that I am worried about because I think the market will cause the leading U.S. institutions to seize upon a new source of revenue, and we will be left behind in Canada. Unless the government forces the issue in Canada, it is not going to happen.

QUESTION, *Professor Entin*: Your comment about Shakespeare and the supposed golden age reminds me of a story. My father went to one of the oldest and most distinguished public high schools in the United States. And sixty years ago in study hall one day, he was accosted by a supervisor who asked him why he was reading a particular Shakespeare play at the time when it was not assigned. He said he was reading it because it was fun. The supervisor told him that he could not do that unless he got a note from his teacher. The study hall supervisor grew up to be superintendent of schools in the school district, which may say something about what happened to the school district later on.

COMMENT, *Dr. Smith*: I have a theory about that.

QUESTION, *Professor Entin*: But I want more seriously to pick up on a couple of things that you have said, Dr. Smith. You said there is an important disconnect between education and the workplace and that employers often find workers inadequately trained for the work that needs to be done. But at the same time, we have a lot of dissatisfaction about the level of civic education and civic participation, at least in the United States, and a lot of the concern has to do with inadequacies of our educational system on that side.

I wonder what the prospects might be for employers who are concerned about the preparation and skills of their workers and citizens who are concerned about the general state of public life in this country. Perhaps they should combine forces because some of the skills that employers are concerned about: literacy, problem solving, group dynamics, and the ability to work in teams seem to me to be values that we ought to place fairly high if we want to have the kind of civic life that we are bemoaning the absence of these days. I wonder what the prospects might be for a joint enterprise in this regard.

ANSWER, *Dr. Smith*: My feeling is that it is possible to bring the workplace closer together with educational institutions by the means I was talking about earlier; work teams, and so on. When it comes to trying to change attitudes, however, or trying to change our appreciation of democracy, or our free enterprise economy, I really do not believe education can do that. Education follows and reflects society. At its best, it does not lag too far behind what is changing in society, but it cannot (and probably should not) get ahead of society.

If you could picture a group of school principals and teachers planning where they think society ought to be and trying to get their students to be out ahead of where the society is, I would be concerned about that. People learn about civics at home, on television, and from

their friends in the school yard. I have no objection to teaching basic things like the Constitution of the United States. People should know the basics. But as for attitudes, I do not believe education leads; I believe education follows.

By the way, when you mentioned that school superintendent, I have a theory about what has happened. Back about forty or fifty years ago when I was in school, only the men got promoted. In those days it was possible for men to get lots of different jobs, and teaching was underpaid. So the men who went into teaching were either very dedicated, or they really were not the best of the crop. Those men rose to the top; became the principals; became the school superintendents; and we ended up with mediocrity, or worse, throughout the organization.

I think that we are still paying the penalty for that discrimination. Now the people who are applying to faculties of education are the best students rather than the mediocre ones, at least in Canada. In Canada, you are now seeing extremely well-qualified students going for careers in education, and now we are promoting more women.

QUESTION, Professor Shanker: Some of your comments struck me as being somewhat inconsistent. You seem to be suggesting schools, from the high schools into the collegiate levels, do a pretty good job, but we need some method of getting technical skills which employers demand, and you suggested some ways by which this could be done. And you said schools can never get ahead of their society.

There was a conference of American business people a couple of weeks ago, which I think articulated a feeling that a lot of Americans seem to have here in the United States, which is that the schools are not doing such a good job, and not just in informational subjects. They are not teaching basic communication skills. People do not speak English very well, nor do they write it very well. They do not think critically. Employers are saying we need people who can communicate; we need people who think critically; and they do not know anything about math. The business people are saying we have got to do something about these failures in the schools. Did you find any of that in your studies and, if so, do you have any comments about that?

ANSWER, Dr. Smith: I only studied Canada, so I cannot speak of what is happening in the schools in the United States. There are a lot of anecdotes about people who are dependent on calculators or who do not communicate very well. But I found that it was hard to prove that case. When people actually looked at the performance of the students in Canada, performance really had not declined.

They are not doing math at the level of some of the Asian schools which emphasize math. The real question is how much math do people really need? I wonder why we teach people trigonometry, for example, unless they are going to be civil engineers. They should know that it exists and they should understand the general principles, but why

should they have to know how to do the calculations, given that for twenty dollars they can buy a calculator?

I hear a lot of people say that our school systems turn out people who cannot read and write, but I do not think there is really any proof of that. Written communication does need improvement, but I suspect it is not our school systems' fault. I suspect it is the fact that we are a television society. There is a program at the University of Winnipeg in Canada, which is the best I found in the whole country. Every student who came in had to write a two-page essay upon entering. That was graded and the student was assigned to one of three groups: advanced, ordinary, or remedial. The ordinary ones were in the majority, and they entered a program in which they had to produce various kinds of written expository communication. Everybody had to pass a certain level of proficiency by their third year. The advanced group had no trouble, of course; the ordinary group generally made it, and the remedial group had to work their way up to a reasonable level, or they did not get to finish their degree. The students ended up able to express themselves in various forms of expository writing, not fiction or poetry, but simply explaining things to people. That was a superb program, a terrific success. But I asked them to have every person write an essay at the end of the program, and have it objectively marked and compared with the one they had done on entry. I went farther and suggested that every university have people write such an essay on entry and on exit. They need not be marked student by student, but in the aggregate. Then the marks could be announced to the public, so we could see value added or subtracted, as the case might be. And even Winnipeg, which is a pioneering institution, refused to do that. Accountability is what I am really talking about, but institutional accountability is still not the order of the day in public institutions, I am afraid.